

The Mayor's Statement to the Electors of Edmonton re the Plebiscite in the Fire Department

February 27, 1918.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:—

General criticism must exist, based solely on the fact that there has been trouble and confusion about this matter. People say, quite naturally, that in some way this should have been avoided, but the sense of irritation at the manner in which a thing has been done and a dispute as to whether it could not have been done much better, should not take our attention from the real merits of the case.

Subject to all possible blame and criticism as to method, let me once more assure the citizens of Edmonton that I am more than ever convinced that the appointment of Chief Davidson was in the best interests of the City.

In order to justify this it becomes necessary to do what is personally very unpleasant, namely, to discuss the general condition of the former brigade. Obviously, as your newly-elected Mayor, my information is not based on personal observation and experience with them, but I shall make no statement which I do not believe to be absolutely true and capable of proof.

A fireman's life shows violent contrasts between spasms of strenuous physical work, calling for a high degree of courage, and intervals of entirely insufficient employment. In such circumstances, the morale of a force can only be preserved by a high standard of discipline. I believe that, speaking generally, the old force was deteriorating in this respect. It had perhaps not yet reached the stage where it impaired their fire-fighting qualities under the stimulus of the task before them, but it was bound in time to do so. This is not meant as any reflection on many splendid fellows on the force, looked at as individual members of that force.

The very expensive apparatus under the charge of these men was allowed to suffer. A Manufacturer's Expert, whom we have had here to go over it, found it in a deplorable condition. His detailed report of the repairs, etc., that are needed, has not yet come to hand, but he reported to me verbally that the crank shafts of two of the heavy trucks which broke in December, did so because bearings had not been properly looked after. He had not been here for two years, but at that time he found certain repairs urgently needed and had them expressed. On his recent visit here, two years later, he found these repair parts on the shelves. He stated that some grease-cups on the trucks looked to him as though they had never been greased in the two years since his last visit. The exact condition of the apparatus under the old brigade will show up in much greater detail when the report from this man is presented to Council with the list of repair parts which are needed.

It is perhaps necessary to weary the public once more with a short statement that should dispose of some of the insinuations and charges which are being made.

Shortly after my election, Mayor Henry informed me that there would be a vacancy in the Fire Department, as Chief Henderson was resigning on account of ill-health. He said there was no man in the Department fit to take charge. There would be a chance of discussing the matter with Ex-Chief Davidson because he, Mayor Henry, had ascertained that he was coming here to spend Christmas with his family.

On the 17th or 18th of December I asked Mr. English, the secretary, to find out if Davidson had arrived and to ask him to come and see me. This he did on December 18th, and I am thoroughly satisfied from his attitude at that interview that he had not been approached in any way, or reached any decision in regard to it. Our discussion was purely tentative. I remember urging on him the advantage of Edmonton as the place for his family to continue to reside among their friends, as against his moving them to Chicago where he was in business. Nothing at all was decided at this interview. Davidson was to think the matter over and see us again.

Ex-Chief Henderson called, urging the appointment of Ex-Chief Lauder. I first asked if it was quite impossible for him to reconsider his resignation, but his account of his nervous state was corroborated, in my judgment, by his appearance.

The application of Jamieson was discussed and I was quite willing to accept my fellow-commissioner's judgment that he lacked sufficient executive ability for the position. I am sure this was right from interviews I have had since with Mr. Jamieson, however estimable his qualities may be in other respects. I know, too, that the men did not regard him very seriously as a possible Chief, although many of them signed the petition urging his appointment.

One other applicant from the brigade was very honest about the situation, saying that he had not earned \$10.00 a month since joining, but I had to tell him in reply to his suggestion that if he were made chief he could save the City thousands of dollars by cutting down the force, that we must have the reserve strength in case of real need.

We finally decided to engage Davidson, and sent for him on December 27th. He then made the perfectly natural suggestion, which, however has been twisted and misrepresented ever since, that he should not telegraph his resignation from his then position, but that in fairness to his company he would like to discuss the matter with them and give them a certain amount of option as to when they could dispense with his services.

I wish also to say that I have completely satisfied myself that absolutely no request was made to Chief Henderson to resign and no pressure brought on him to that end.

When I returned to the City on February 7th, the strike had already been on for a week. I need not remind the citizens of the unsuccessful attempt I made to get a hearing at a public meeting that night. I did, however, present some of the facts of the case in interviews in the newspapers, then and since. In later negotiations, the only point worth retailing has to do with the actual taking of the plebiscite.

If I remember correctly, it was on Tuesday, the 19th, that a large deputation from the Allied Trades waited on me, demanding a plebiscite as the only alternative to a general sympathetic strike. I maintained then that it was not a proper question to put to a vote of people, as it concerned qualifications of men for a technical position, and I suggested that we set up a tribunal to establish the fact on which the whole dispute hinged.

A special meeting of Council was called the following day and Council agreed to allow its decision in this matter to be reviewed by an impartial tribunal. To make it impartial, we accepted Alderman McCoppen's suggestion that the members of the tribunal be chosen in collaboration with a committee of the Allied Trades. This committee met our committee the next day and at the close of the session substantial progress had been made towards the selection of the

tribunal. We had great hopes that the next morning the actual members of the tribunal would be chosen and within a comparatively few days they could reach their conclusion, and thus the whole matter be settled.

When we convened again on the following morning, however, representatives of the Allied Trades stated positively that they would not assist in choosing the tribunal and, more fundamental still, that the firemen withdrew their undertaking which the Allied Trades' committee had expressed to us the day before, to abide by the findings of the tribunal, unless we immediately dismissed Davidson and his men and reinstated the whole of the old force.

To do this would have meant to turn out Chief Davidson and his men, who are and have been rendering strenuous and effective assistance to the City in its time of need, and to put back the men who took the law into their own hands and left it defenceless. To yield such a point would, in the mind of the Council, and of all serious citizens, leave the City for the future completely at the whim of those working for it, because after such an experience, none could be expected to come forward to help.

I have referred to the lack of discipline in the old force. No man need become a fireman, but once he decides to join he assumes a position of peculiar trust and responsibility to the community at large. On him, and not on another, rests the duty of protecting the lives and properties of the citizens. Any man, or any number of men, who desert their posts to secure their own ends, have not yet developed a sufficient sense of duty and loyalty to fit them for the position of command. That sense of duty and loyalty in all walks of life, develops gradually with increasing responsibility. The material may be there, no doubt is, but since those in line for promotion could not, or would not, step up, we had no choice but to act as we did.

I hold, as heartily as anyone, with the principle of promotions from the ranks to posts of ever-increasing responsibility. In this case we could not apply it. It has been proved, and the men no longer gainsay it, that there is nothing in the proceedings before the Board of Conciliation which bears directly on the point. The phrase "In all promotions due consideration shall be given to seniority" means exactly what it says, namely: If a promotion is to be made and two men stand equal, the senior in service gets it.

As I said in my first interview on returning to the City and before I had any idea of the extent to which this cause had been taken up by other bodies of organized labor, it was absolutely not a question of Unionism or Anti-Unionism.

Before the Conciliation Board the men had agreed to give two weeks' notice to resign. This they did not do. Their ultimatum to the City was dated January 30th, and received the 31st. The men walked out at noon the following day. I held then, and I hold now, that the strike was entirely unjustified; the men had their legal remedies, and I believe their action would not be supported by the higher leaders of the Trade Union movement. I further added that that great cause suffered most from such acts of its friends.

I am constrained to believe that the position has been seized upon by the forces of general unrest in the community. For the time, the sober ranks of organized labor have allowed themselves to be made use of and many good citizens have reached a hasty conclusion without realizing the danger in the broad issue involved.

A comparatively small group has supplied all the speakers at the various public meetings and these have been attended largely by the same people. They have bolstered up their cause by giving anything but a fair hearing to those whose views they did not share, and the public should bear in mind that some of their speakers have not hesitated from the platform at those meetings to talk revolution and armed resistance to the constituted authority. They have made free use of the threat of a general strike with its subsequent suffering on defenceless women and children, many of whose men are away at the front, and they have further attempted to press their ends by boycott and intimidation.

I would urge the people in this City to ponder carefully and soberly what those things mean and whither they tend.

Let each citizen realize that on him personally will fall the full consequence of his decision.

The question to be decided on Monday is:

“Shall the elected representatives of the people be allowed to exercise their judgment in all good faith and sincerity in the administration of the City’s affairs, or are we to have rule by agitation?”

Let the people decide.